

## A GLANCE AT AN EXTINCT CRAFT OF COTTON LOIN CLOTH PRODUCTION AND ZARI BORDER WEAVING AT MANDVI, SURAT

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### ABSTRACT

*Balram S. had affirmed that the one of India's strength is its enormously rich tradition. A wealth of knowledge, distilled through generations of evolution, exists but is not apparent because of the oral nature of Indian society in which written records are not kept. Traditions simply were passed on by word of mouth, from generation to generation, and this practice continues to this day. Gujarat is a state of many traditional crafts nurtured by generations of skilled artisans. One such craft was of tarap weaving practiced by khatris in Mandvi, a small town near Surat in South Gujarat. The textile once formed an important part of cultural attire of the Chodhary and Gamit tribes of South Gujarat. The craft has been given out now but the local practitioners have inducted means for executing their innate skills to develop products that have lucrative market in the nearby hub Surat. Field visits were paid and interview method was implemented in order to comprehend this craft culture of earthy genre. Oral histories were recorded and the data was supported by only literature available in the form of monograph published by Gujarat Vidyapeeth which was timely authored by Shri Haku Shah and Eberhard Fischer in 1979.*

**KEYWORDS:** Tribal Cloth, Extinct Craft, Single Ikat Weaving and Zari Weaving

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### INTRODUCTION

Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, several million Indian craftspeople continue to use traditional weaving and patterning techniques to create unique textiles. Weavers, embroiders, printers, and dyers all over the region produce traditional garment fabrics for the fashion industry, contemporary home furnishings, ritual and temple cloths, common tourist souvenirs, and materials for the export trade (Jain R, 2011: 8). Outside these professional textile workshops and centers that serviced courts, temples, and long-distance trade, a great variety of artistic cloths has been produced by India's tribal, pastoral, and agricultural communities. Many blocks like Mandvi, Ahwa, Dharampur, Songadh, Valod, Vyara and Vandsa are the tribal concentric blocks of Surat, Valsad and Dang districts of Gujarat. These places are the point of juncture for tribal communities like Bhil, Vasava, Chodhary, Gamit, Kotwalia and Konkans. One can still trace them adorned in distinctive tribal costumes purchasing provisions, livestock and product of daily utilities in flea markets or week days in these towns.



**Figure 1: Votive Terracots Sold in the Market of the Town of Mandvi**

Mandvi, one such small town located in Surat district of Gujarat, has lot to showcase about tribal lifestyle and culture. Located on the bank of river Tapi, it had once been the State of King of Bhils. Numerous forms of tribal crafts like votive terracotta mask making, basketry and patku/ tarap weaving has flourished here.

*Tarap* or *patku* was both the ceremonial cloth and article of daily utility for the women and men of Chodhary and Gamit tribes. Later, the harsh blows of modernization had led to the shift in the taste of tribal community wearing them which made weavers to discontinue the practice of weaving this textile. The producers have now adapted their skills in weaving zari laces on loom. Hence, the present paper has been chalked out to solicit the presence of oral knowledge of already languished craft and how the weaving community has managed to swerve their existing potentials and skills to generate alternative market for them.

## METHODOLOGY

The tarap weaving was identified as one of the defunct craft, knowledge base for which existed only amongst the first generation weavers. The two first generation weavers in the town of Mandvi were interviewed and information provided was re-discussed and corroborated based on the monograph published by Eberherd Fischer and Shri Haku Shah. Five females engaged in zari weaving techniques were interviewed and photographic documentation of existent lifestyle of the people of Mandvi and those of zari weavers was carried out.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Mass production and industrialization have made several communities in the developing world unable to survive. Their work and skill have lost relevance to present requirements. Same was the case with the tribal weaving craft of mandvi. With the prices of raw materials going high and laborious process involved in the production, these textiles slowly

became unaffordable to the local tribes. The cheap and long lasting form of plastic- Polyester, became every common man's choice in the region. Weavers had started to gain no profit from their traditional occupation and then there was a switch from the traditional occupation.



**Figure 2: A Chodhary Woman in Contemporary Polyester Odhna and Sadlo**

The craft, though completely died some five to eight years ago, was still found to be forming the necessity of tribal community at the time of funeral ceremony. This coarsely woven cotton textile in single Ikat weaving technique, worn by the Chodhari and Gamit tribes, was not so familiar amongst the textile historians.

The only literature available was in the form of monograph published by Gujarat Vidyapith which was timely authored by Shri Haku Shah and Eberhard Fischer in 1979. A sample of textile was documented and preserved in the Museum of Ethnography Basel in Switzerland, collected by Alfred Buhler in 1977.

Field visit led to the identification of the master weaver who was the sole bearer of the knowledge pertaining to the weaving technique. He seemed to be showing no interest in its revival. The practitioners had wanted their descendents to excel and study further. They were aware of the quota system and other encouragement policies introduced by the Government for encouraging them to study and exceed ahead. The idea of weaving, carrying forward their ancestral activity and its promotion were futile to them.

#### **Tarap Weaving Craft: Persistence of Oral Traditional**

Being identified as *tarap* or *lugdi*, this textile was an important part of the culture of Chodhary and Gamit tribe of South Gujarat. These were simple striped fabric in three colours - Red, brown, blue and white. The first category of tarap had broad white band towards the selvedge followed by alternate white and blue stripe all over the fabric. The broad white borders across the width of the fabric were achieved through single ikat technique. Since, the technique was very simple

and because of the lack of vigilance of the weavers, haziness or flamed effect was produced at the point of interaction of white with nearby red region. This category of textile was called *Kabra Salla* or *sadlu*. In the second category of *tarap*, the broad border existed in blue colour, followed by thin strips of alternating red, white and blue. Then, there was an arrangement of two white bands separated by red field. Both the broad blue and white bands were achieved through weft ikat technique. The second category of textile was termed as *Rahi Salla*.



**Source:** Simple weft Ikat from South Gujarat, India

**Figure 3: Chodhary Woman in Traditional Rahi Salla**

The costumes of tribes in conglomeration with these textiles comprised of a blouse called *Kabjo*, lower draped skirt in form of dhoti and a veil cloth called *odhni*. These textiles when used as lower drape cloth were called *tarap*, when draped as a veil cloth was termed as *odhni*. When it was wrapped around head, it signified that the woman has been invited as guest.

Kabra Salla was used mostly in weddings while second category that had field in plain red, called Rahi Salla was used more. The lady wearing striped *tarap* for longer period of time explained that she was newlywed. This old and worn out cloth was later utilized in storing chapattis and hanging cradles for infants. Mr. Babubhai Gandevia, added that these textiles are still needed at the time of funeral or last rituals of the females of these tribes. On request of the tribes, they get these textiles woven in Dholka- a town near Ahmedabad. These textiles produced do not possess the traditional characteristics of single ikat technique but are rather the simulated forms of traditional pieces produced on power loom.

As further explained by the weaver, these textiles used to be 32" wide and 5 meters long. The yarns were procured from Surat. The warps were made ready first and lease tied with extra thread. Later hanks were treated with myrobalan and alum and were washed in the river water of Tapi. The washed warp and weft yarns were then dyed in alizarin.

The craft of *tarap* weaving had completely died in the town of Mandvi. Males of surviving first generation, who had woven textiles in the past, were the only surviving knowledge bearer of this textile tradition.





**Figure 4: A Section of Rahi Salla, Procured From the Local Market of Mandvi the Sample Was Woven in 2x2 Basket Weave and the Fabric Count was 20x22. It was the Simulated form Traditional Ikat Sample Woven at Dholka, Ahmedabad**

#### **Zari Weaving Craft: Reflection of the Power of Inherent Skills**

Vandana Bhandari in her book states that Surat has always had a dynamic merchant class, who took full advantage of the city's position to south India, a larger consumer of zari woven articles such as saris and angavastrams thereby accessing a wider market. Zari making artisans are scattered all over Surat out of which ninety five percent of the zari units are in the city itself (Bhandari V, 2015:35).



**Source:** Gold and Silver Embroidered Clothes of India

**Figure 5: Traditional Zari Weaving Loom Called Ghoda Shal in Gujarat**

Today, the khatris of mandvi on absorbing local influence have manipulated their inherited skills to develop products that are more commercially viable and can be sold in nearby textile hub Surat.

These days' zari laces and borders are woven by the females of the town. Mr. Babubhai Gandevia informs that there were thirty-two ladies practicing this craft in and around the town of Mandvi. Twenty of them wove alone in the town and rest twelve resided in the nearby villages.

The *lugdi* weaver was the main agent who introduced this craft in the town of *Mandvi* a decade ago. He started this business involving ladies of his own house and later involved other women of his community from town, who were in need of some economic activity. He acts as a trader who would get orders and raw materials to engage women to work as wage workers for him. *Babubhai* explains that weaving activity in the town is an encouraging activity of self employment for women. Along with household chores, they indulge and try to weave laces of minimum Rs. 100 each day, thereby, making earning of Rs. 3000 per month. Depending upon the interest and availability of time, some even devote five hours per day. The income of the joint families was higher as the elder women would assist in winding spool and other ancillary activities so that the younger counterparts can only engage in weaving activity.



Figure 6: Old Lady from the Family Engaged in Beading String to be Used at Weft Insertions



Figure 7: Prepared Bobbins for Weaving



**Figure 8: Khatri Women Weaving Border on Ghoda Shal**

The technology of weaving zari laces has seemed to be inspired from the more complex method of producing brocade borders in Ahmedabad. Varadarajan L. and Patel K. mentions in their book that in earlier times brocade borders, pallus and borders patterned with zari in extra warp were woven by the weavers of the Hindu Khatri caste, whereas the *Asavali* saris were woven mainly by the Patel community. The loom typology of *ghoda shal* loom used for weaving borders as explained in the book is similar to the loom presently being used in Mandvi. The loom comprises of a wooden stand that supports the treadles generally cords called *pavdi* in colloquial term to which shafts or *ranch* are attached. Each shaft is attached to a heddle horse made of wooden sticks. The string suspended from the ceiling is tied to the center of the horse balancing the shaft. The *hatho* or sley houses the reed/ *phanni*, and it rests directly on the warp. The warp is held in tension, its farthest end being tied to a rope which is guided by spools and weighed down by weights. The other end of the warp is tied to the cloth beam (Patel K. and Varadarajan L, 2008: 91).

A bundle of six meters of lace in different designs and patterns were woven. There is no specific name given to the kinds of laces manufactured. Golden beads, tiny pearls, sequins and different forms of accessories were seen utilized to make a complete string of them in thin nylon wire.

Sequins are sometimes sewn on a flattened form of laces available in market. All these were manipulated as per weavers innate design skills or based on the order received from the retailers. The effort cost for weaving each bundle varies from Rs. 10 to Rs 45, depending upon the width and complexity in the designs involved. Weavers asserted that young and middle aged lady could weave one bundle (i.e. 6meters) in one hour and if the speed is retained well with concentration, one can weave a single bundle in 35 minutes.

Some of the households were provided with old yet functional semi-automatic looms machines meant to manufacture elastics. These were bought and installed to produce zari ribbons called *tui* of varied width in larger lengths. For this kind of lace, women were paid Rs. 5 to Rs. 6 per six meters. Since, it yielded more output; the earnings in these kinds of simpler laces were more.

## CONCLUSIONS

Indian villages were self-sufficient. Weavers, tailors, potters and farmers co-existed for survival and self-sufficiency. A tribal town of Mandvi survives amongst those rare centers wherein tribal visit weekly *haat* (flea market) to sell self manufactures and purchase textiles and daily amenities. Despite the slow change, the roots of mainstream culture have deteriorated with time. Traditional modes of dressing persists but with adoption of mill made synthetic clothes. Clothes that are unfit for the climate as well the skin. But up here, survival becomes more important when compared to clothes. Traditional, *Lugdas* and *taraps*, yet formed the integral part of cultural belongings but being unaffordable it turned into a precious and rare acquisition. Whereas, while pondering upon the situation from production's perspective, one can note that the town has proved to be a prototypical model or example of system wherein skills and crafts have migrated and expert descendants have managed to acquire practice of zari weaving with the changing times. Thus, gradually as the context and the necessity would change, so will the culture evolve impacting upon various skills and crafts. Some might acquire, other would vanish and with times the forms might evolve.

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